Names of God in the New Testament

Abbreviations

Harper's Bible Dictionary

edited by Paul J. Achtemier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985)

You are strongly recommended to add to your library the excellent revised edition of *Harper's Bible Dictionary* titled, *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Revised Edition* [book review], edited by Paul J. Achtemeier, with the Society of Biblical Literature (NY: Harper Collins, 1996). It is currently the best one-volume Bible dictionary in English, and it is available at Border's Books, Christian Science Reading Rooms, http://www.borders.com, or http://www.christianbook.com.

Names of God in the New Testament. The names used by NT authors to refer to God reflect the fact that the NT was written in a Greek-speaking culture primarily on the basis of a tradition and terminology inherited from the OT and Judaism as mediated by the Septuagint (LXX). This tradition was significantly modified both by the early church's understanding of the teaching of Jesus and by its understanding of the person of Jesus as the definitive expression of God.

God: The most common word for God in the NT (1,318 times) is the Greek word *theos* ('god'), used often by the LXX (more than 4,000 times) primarily as the translation of the usual Hebrew word for God, elohim. This word was also used by the LXX for the pagan gods, just as it was the standard word for the gods of the Greeks and Romans of NT times. Although the NT writers sometimes use 'god' for the pagan gods (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:5) and on rare occasions apparently apply it theologically to the glorified Christ (e.g., John 20:28), the vast majority of cases refers to the God revealed in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus. Thus, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' is a frequent designation (e.g., Rom. 15:6).

Lord: In the OT , the chief title and representative name for God was the individual and personal name 'Yahweh,' translated kyrios (Gk., 'Lord') in the LXX and 'the Lord' by several English versions. This name was used by OT authors more than 6,000 times, compared to about 2,500 times for elohim, 'God.' The NT continues to use 'Lord' for God (about 100 times), primarily in quotations from the LXX (e.g., Mark 1:3; 12:11; Acts 2:34) and in set phrases such as 'hand of the Lord' (Luke 1:66). The vast majority of the 719 occurrences of kyrios ('Lord') in the NT refers to Jesus, however, usually as the exalted Christ (e.g., Acts 2:36; John 20:28). Thus, the two most common OT names for deity, 'God' and 'Lord,' are used in the NT not only for God but also (though rarely in the case of the word 'God') for Jesus as the exalted Lord of the church's faith. A much less common word for 'Lord' in the LXX, despoteµs (Gk., 'lord,' 'sovereign,' 'master') is also used in the NT both for God (Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; Rev. 6:10) and for Christ (Jude 4; 2 Pet. 2:1).

Father: The common ancient Near Eastern idea that the deity is the father of the clan or nation was appropriated sparingly by Israel, which understood it in an adoptive, not biological, sense (Exod. 4:22-23; Hos. 11:1-4). Although 'Father' never became a common name for God in the OT , it was used more freely in the later OT period (e.g., Isa. 63:16) and especially in post-ot Judaism. 'Father' was also a common name for deity among the Greeks, being applied to Zeus, for example, not only because of his rulership among the gods, but because of his love and care. This general designation of God as 'Father' is found only rarely in the NT : e.g., Heb. 12:9 ('Father of spirits') and James 1:17 ('Father of lights,' i.e., the heavenly bodies).

It was the person and teaching of Jesus that played the formative role in the nt's language about God as 'Father.' For Jesus, 'Father' was the principal and most frequent designation for God. He used not only the common Jewish 'our [or your] Father' (e.g., Matt. 5:45; 6:9) but also the intimate family word for 'father' in his native Aramaic language, abba, which was also appropriated in the later liturgical practice of the church (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Not only did the concept of God as 'Father' express the personal relationship to God affirmed by Jesus and the church (e.g., Matt. 11:25-27), but in that cultural setting the term included especially the connotations of obedience, agency, and inheritance. Those who address God as 'Father' acknowledge God as the one to whom absolute obedience is due (Matt. 7:21; 26:42) and themselves as the agents who represent God and through whom God works (Matt. 11:25-27; John 10:32) and as God's heirs (Rom. 8:16-17).

'The God of the Fathers': This significant OT title for God, as well as the more particular phrase of the same meaning, 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' is found in the NT only in two Gospels (Mark 12:26; Matt. 22:32) and in the book of Acts. As in the OT , it emphasizes the continuity of Israel and the church's faith, that the God of present experience is the same as the God revealed to the ancient patriarchs. Luke-Acts, which is especially interested in pointing out this continuity, thus uses the title four times (Acts 3:13; 5:30; 7:32; 22:14). In Paul and the literature dependent upon him, this title is replaced by 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 11:31; Eph. 1:3, 17; Col. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3).

The Almighty: The LXX had translated two of the Hebrew expressions for God in the OT , which probably meant ‘God, the one of the mountains’ (rsv: ‘God Almighty’) and ‘Yahweh of Hosts,’ with the more philosophical and formal pantokratoμr (Gk., ‘Almighty’), which the Greeks had also used for their gods. Jesus and the NT authors seem to avoid this appellation, which is found only in 2 Cor. 6:18 and nine times in Revelation, mostly in self-designations of God or in ascriptions of praise in a liturgical context.

Alpha and Omega: These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and thus represent God as the Beginning and the End, the source and goal of all creation, and thus the only God. The phrase itself is not found in the OT , but the basic formula from which it is derived is found in Isa. 44:6 and 48:12. In the NT , only the author of Revelation uses this name for God (1:8; 21:6); he also applies it explicitly to Jesus Christ (22:13; cf. 1:17; 2:8).

The Holy One: This OT title for God, especially in Isaiah, explicitly refers to God only once in the NT (Rev. 16:5). It is used of Jesus in Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; and John 6:69. In 1 John 2:20, the reference may be either to God or to the exalted Christ.

General Terms: The common impersonal words for ‘deity’ in Greek are absent from those LXX books that are derived from the Hebrew canon of the OT and appear only once in the remainder of the LXX (Wisd. of Sol. 18:9). Correspondingly, ‘Deity’ as a term for God is found in the NT only in Paul’s address to the Athenians in Acts 17:29, and in Col. 2:9.

The line between explicit names for God and more general designations is sometimes difficult to draw. Among the more common general designations used in the OT that are adopted in significant ways by NT authors are ‘King’ (e.g., Matt. 5:35; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15), ‘Judge’ (e.g., John 8:50; Heb. 12:23), and ‘Savior’ (e.g., Luke 1:47; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10), all of which are applied more frequently to Jesus Christ than to God.

In the NT period, many Jews expressed their reverence for the explicit names for God by substituting periphrastic ways of speaking of God. This practice is reflected to some extent in the NT , especially in the sayings of Jesus (though Jesus did not hesitate to make use of explicit names for God). Among such periphrastic and reverential terms for God are ‘the Blessed’ (Mark 14:61), ‘Power’ (Mark 14:62), ‘Heaven’ (Luke 15:18 and often in the Matthean phrase ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ as a substitute for ‘Kingdom of God’), and the ‘Majestic Glory’ (2 Pet. 1:17). In addition, God is sometimes referred to by using the passive voice (the so-called ‘divine passive,’ e.g., Matt. 5:4, 6, 7, 9) and the impersonal ‘they’ (e.g., Luke 16:9; also Luke 6:38; 12:20; and 12:48 are such in Greek but not in the English translation).